

Teen Suicide Warning Signs

In our culture of shows like 13 Reasons Why and where there is much more open discussion around suicide and mental health, we want our mentors to have this valuable information.

Suicide is alarmingly common. It is the eighth leading cause of death for all people (accounting for about 1% of all deaths) and the third leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 24 (following accidents and homicide). Many teen suicides can be prevented if warning signs are detected and appropriate intervention is conducted.

The reasons: No two teenagers are alike, but there are some common reasons they consider suicide. Many teens who attempt suicide do so during an acute crisis in reaction to some conflict with peers or parents. Such conflicts are common among teens, but those who attempt suicide are particularly reactive to them because they:

- Have a long-standing history of problems at home or school
- Suffer from low self-esteem
- Believe no one cares
- Are depressed
- Abuse alcohol or drugs
- Have experienced other acutely stressful events, such as an unwanted pregnancy, trouble with the law, or not meeting high parental expectations

Signs of trouble: Research shows that nine out of 10 individuals who attempt suicide have a history of mental illness or substance abuse, making these extremely important risk factors. The warning signs include:

- Noticeable changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Unexplained or unusually severe, violent, or rebellious behavior
- Withdrawal from family or friends
- Sexual promiscuity, truancy, and vandalism
- Drastic personality change
- Agitation, restlessness, distress, or panicky behavior
- Talking or writing about committing suicide, even jokingly
- Giving away prized possessions
- Doing worse in school

How to help: If you notice any of these warning signs, you should take these steps:

- Offer help and listen. Don't ignore the problem. What you've noticed may be the teen's way of crying out for help. Offer support, understanding and compassion. Talk about feelings and the behaviors you have seen that cause you to feel concerned. You don't need to solve the problem or give advice. Sometimes just caring and listening, and being nonjudgmental, gives all the understanding necessary.
- Take talk of suicide seriously, and use the word "suicide." Talking about suicide doesn't cause suicide—but avoiding what's on the teen's mind may make that teen feel truly alone and uncared for. Tell the youngster that together you can develop a strategy to make things better. *Ask if the child has a plan for suicide. If he or she does, then seek professional help immediately.*
- If the danger is not imminent, speak with the child's parents/guardians so they can get professional help. A teen at risk of suicide needs professional help. Even when the immediate crisis passes, the risk of suicidal behavior remains high until new ways of dealing and coping with problems are learned.
- Don't be afraid to take the child to a hospital emergency room if it is clear that he or she is planning suicide. You may not be able to handle the situation on your own and that is ok.